DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 033 059 SP 003 071

By-Ashabranner, Brent
From the Peace Corps, A New Kind of Teacher.
Pub Date Apr 68
Note-5p.
Available from-Department of Elementary School Principals, National Education Assn., 1201 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 ($1.00)
Journal Cit-The National Elementary Principal; v47 n5 p38-42 Apr 1968
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
Descriptors-Beginning Teachers, Teacher Certification, Teacher Orientation, Teacher Recruitment, *Teaching Experience, *Urban Teaching
Identifiers-*Peace Corps

Many Peace Corps volunteers, returning to see with new eyes and feel with new nerves the sorrows of our own cities, are finding jobs as teachers in inner-city schools. Of the 50 percent sent overseas to teach, more than two thirds are young liberal arts graduates lacking orthodox teaching credentials, but by 1965 many states began recruiting them, often giving salary credit for the two years abroad and granting at least temporary teaching certificates. Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., initiated special programs of teaching and continuing education which included intensive orientation courses, supportive counseling from experienced teachers, and frequent meetings with consultants and subject matter specialists. Returned volunteers find the jobs rough, tough, and frustrating, in some ways more so than their overseas service. Many undergo cultural shock similar to that experienced overseas: some lack professional distance in dealing with students, or expect more of themselves than they can produce. But because improvisation is part of the Peace Corps way of life, they are constantly trying out new ideas to handle their classes. The perception that they bring to their teaching can be a positive influence in designing the tactics needed to cope with the disadvantaged, and if they can see their way through the first difficult months of adjustment, they promise to make an invaluable contribution to this important problem. (JS)

ED033059

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

PROCESS WITH MICROFICHE AND PUBLISHER'S PRICES. MICRO-FICHE REPRODUCTION ONLY.

Permission to reproduce this copyrighted work has been granted to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and to the organization operating under contract with the Office of Education to reproduce documents included in the ERIC system by means of microfiche only, but this right is not conferred to any users of the microfiche received from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Further reproduction of any part requires permission of the copyright owner.

FROM THE PEACE CORPS, A NEW KIND OF TEACHER

BRENT ASHABRANNER

BY the fall of 1967, more than 15,000 Peace Corps Volunteers had completed their two years of service abroad and returned to the United States. After having gone abroad to make some small contribution to the two-thirds of the world's population that is hungry and illiterate, this new breed of American has turned with a frank awareness to our own country. The returned Volunteer has come home to see with new eyes and feel with new nerves the sorrows of discrimination, poverty, and hopelessness in our own cities.

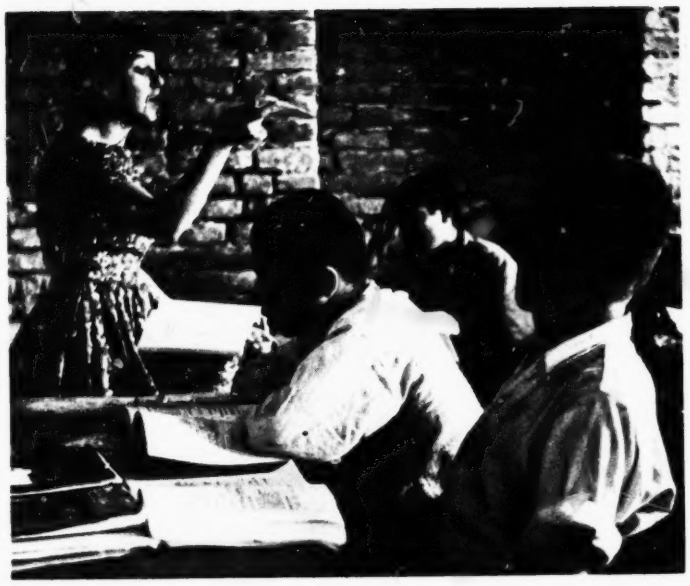
Many Volunteers grew up in middle-class homes, went to school with their social peers, and joined the Peace Corps after college. Said one who is now back teaching in the inner city of his native Philadelphia, "It took me two years overseas with the Peace Corps to see my own city."

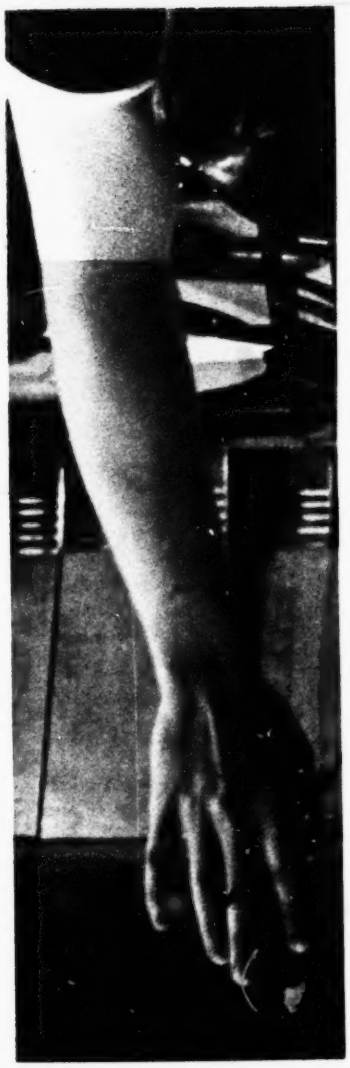
Returned Peace Corps Volunteers all over the country are plugging into areas of need that have become very visible to them. They are finding that there is a job here as challenging, frustrating, hectic, demanding, and rewarding as their service overseas was. The job? Teaching in America's long-neglected inner-city schools. They are learning, too, that it takes more than good intentions and a great deal of energy to teach in the slums. The qualities of personality and dedication which took them abroad and kept them on the job there stand them in good stead now.

Fifty per cent of those Volunteers sent overseas teach, although less than a third are experienced teachers or education majors. Most are young liberal arts graduates. The qualifications of these "B.A. Generalists" are high ideals, optimism, energy, curiosity, and learning ability. They thrive on seeking new ways to solve old problems. They form the basis of the Peace Corps' working assumption that the American college graduate has a good foundation of *what* to teach—his college major or minor—and that he has the ability to learn *how* to teach. For them, teaching means

Brent Ashabranner is Deputy Director of the Peace Corps. He was formerly Director of Peace Corps Volunteer Training and Education Advisor to overseas aid missions in Ethiopia, Libya, and Nigeria.

SP003071





the encouraging of responses from their students to the world around them and the nurturing of independence, initiative, and energy necessary to their and their country's development. Transmitting factual information becomes a secondary educational process.

In a recent speech on education, President Julius Nyerere of East Africa's Republic of Tanzania described his country's educational goal this way: "It is of no use to have the teachers giving to their pupils the answers to existing problems in our nation. By the time the pupils are adults, the problems will have changed. Instead, they have to develop among their pupils a 'problem-solving' capacity—an ability to think, to reason, and to analyze the skills and information they have acquired to create new ideas and new solutions to problems."

Many Peace Corps teachers see their teaching jobs as springboards to additional activities. "So much needs to be done and the teacher is in an excellent position to exert his influence, to get people together to solve common problems," says one Peace Corps Volunteer teacher in India.

The resources that the Volunteer teacher overseas can apply to his job surpass the conventional educational techniques. Culling from his own background, he can seek to develop elementary habits of trust and health, pragmatic thought, optimism, geographical horizons which hint at a world beyond village and tribal boundaries, and, as one staff member put it, "a sense of possibility."

The Volunteer usually must function in classrooms plagued by overcrowding, insufficient and irrelevant textbooks, bad discipline, and negative attitudes stemming from his students' poor preparation, low physical stamina, and weak motivation. He encounters, in short, conditions strikingly similar to those in our own blighted inner-city schools: the nation's number one problem in education today. Of the 20 per cent of returned Volunteers who teach, 31 per cent choose to work in elementary schools.

Four or five years ago, when the first Volunteer teachers completed their service, they found that, lacking orthodox teaching credentials, they could

not easily get jobs. The tide turned in 1965 when the National Education Association's Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards urged schools to make a special effort to hire these young and eager people who had a unique experience behind them and who offered a keen perception of the world before them. The Commission saw great educational value in Volunteers' knowledge of developing lands and peoples, their experience with different cultures, their adaptability to new and unfamiliar conditions, their skill in applying knowledge to practical problems. It urged that returned Volunteers "should be courted, not merely tolerated."

Immediately, states all over the Union began to recruit former Volunteers, most giving salary credit for the two years abroad and many granting temporary teaching certificates.

New Jersey's Commission on Education declared that it wanted teachers "with the Peace Corps syndrome, ready to live in the community in which they teach, so they feel it, they smell it, they taste it, they know the children, know the problems of the children, know the problems of the parents; they are the teachers we must reach for." California went the furthest of all states by granting standard teaching certificates to returnees holding bachelor's degrees who had taught for two years with the Peace Corps.

School superintendents realized that although many of their teachers were moving toward comfortable suburban schools, former Volunteers were willing to work in "undesirable" conditions, whether or not in actual slums. After their overseas service, Volunteers continued to seek a way to contribute to a part of our society in need of help. The National Teacher Corps competed for Volunteers, eyeing them as a rich reservoir from which to draw. Pockets of rural poverty sought Volunteers, too, and Volunteers who had served in Latin America were recruited to teach the Southwest's Spanish-speaking population.

By happy coincidence, the time was right for creative young people to find a place in America's educational sun. Simultaneously, new energy, initiative, money, and ideas were being applied at the national and local level by an admirable if belated concern for the children of urban America. Soon, teaching programs designed solely for Volunteers began to appear. The pioneer Cardozo Project in Urban Teaching was started in Washington, D.C., to place Volunteers in one of the city's disadvantaged secondary schools. They taught during the day and earned their masters-in-teaching degrees at night from Howard University.

The Washington, D.C., public school system recently announced that it will send an official on a month-long tour of Africa this spring in an unprecedented effort to recruit returning Peace Corps Volunteers to teach in the city schools.

In 1965, Cleveland's school system joined with Western Reserve University to begin an experiment with 28 returned Volunteers. The program offered a master's degree in two years with courses designed especially around the plight of the disadvantaged urban child. Volunteers' teaching loads were freed from art and physical education to allow more time for university work.

Last summer, Philadelphia offered a blanket invitation to returned Volunteers to teach in disadvantaged schools. A brochure said that "all of a sudden, in urban education, Philadelphia is where the action is. The job here is as tough and as important as any in America. The Philadelphia school leadership wants you, as returning Volunteers, to help them with it. The school district is chopping through any red tape in an effort to hire you."

Spearheaded by a former Peace Corps staff member, the Philadelphia program sought to fill its biggest gap: elementary school teachers. No references or interviews were required. One hundred and seventy-five Volunteers signed a year's contract through the mails; 75 per cent were recruited as elementary teachers.

A major strength of this new kind of all-returned-Volunteer program has been the intensive orientation courses offered, analogous to the training Volunteers receive before going overseas. Returnees have unanimously found this training highly relevant and invaluable. It gives them faith in the system they must work within. One said, "When I see one of the elementary supervisors from downtown running down the hall calling my name, I begin to think he is reliving the excitement of his own first year of teaching."

In addition to orientation courses, Cleveland and Philadelphia have programed a great deal of supportive counseling from experienced teachers. Frequent meetings with consultants and with subject matter specialists have been welcomed by the new teachers.

What the returned Volunteer now sees is an educational world opening up to him. The vast quantity of indifference confronting those who returned five years ago has been replaced by a willingness to gamble on this unorthodox Volunteer talent with the hope of exploiting it in the United States. An overwhelming reaction among Volunteers seems to be that the job is rough, tough, and frustrating, in some ways more so than was Volunteer service overseas. "College and two years in the Peace Corps were like kindergarten compared with this," says a returned Volunteer who served in Tunisia and is now teaching in Cleveland.

Any glamour of the "crusade" attached to teaching in the inner cities of America is soon forgotten as the former Volunteer confronts once again, but in an entirely new light, the difficulty of applying middle-class techniques—this time in classrooms of "the other America." We all look to him for new and workable techniques. Occasionally, the rewards are deeply satisfying as former Volunteers are able to call forth a response from children who are stimulated to learn for the first time in their lives.

In a sense, returning Peace Corps Volunteers undergo a "culture shock" similar to what most of them experienced overseas. "Culture shock" describes a whole set of symptoms, but it is customary for Volunteers to experience it during the slow process of assimilating a new culture. They are likely to feel depressed and discouraged when their irresistible desire to "get things done" meets the immovable object of reality.

The difficult teaching situations they meet on returning home prompt many former Volunteers to react like the one who said, "I haven't changed my mind about what I want to happen in my class now, but I have decided that it may take longer than I would like." This is a comparatively common reaction of Volunteers after their first six months overseas. Many of them speak of having to scale down their expectations.

One Volunteer, teaching third grade in Philadelphia, remarked, "Overseas, the motivation of the kids was different, or I should say they were mostly motivated by the desire to pass certain exams, in accordance with their long tradition of rote learning. I knew that things here would be different, but I guess I still expected the same sort of passive acceptance of information. I find that my students, for the most part, don't care about school, and learning must be disguised as fun because they are fun-loving and they seem to have no realization that some will fail and some will succeed in life."

Teachers unable to weather the emotionally grueling task have echoed the young woman who said, "It's great, but I just can't keep up with the pace."

One young man, who had served in Ethiopia and who resigned after four weeks of teaching in the States, said "I guess I am not cut out to be a teacher. I love the kids, but I am unable to discipline them and gain good classroom control. I can't seem to meet them on their own level."

The disciplining of rambunctious young children is a recurring theme among Volunteer teachers. Reluctant by their nature and ideals to punish students, these teachers are likely to blame themselves when a class acts up rather than to feel angry toward the children. Overseas, as Volunteers, they developed skills to gain respect and friendship among the people, but these same skills may not work in the inner-city classroom.

The Volunteers see themselves as lacking "professional distance" in dealing with students. But they don't want to achieve it at the cost of the empathy they commonly feel. Because improvisation is part of the Peace Corps way of life, returned Volunteers are constantly trying out new ideas to handle their classes. A 24-year-old woman who served two years in Malaysia and now teaches first grade in the Philadelphia project, says, "I have to innovate much more than I did in the Peace Corps. With my kids, no matter how well I plan a lesson, if their mood isn't right I have to change immediately or I will lose their attention for the rest of the day. You have to be thinking and changing constantly. I found the job a lot easier when I accepted the fact that the kids should be allowed to move around, that they have so much energy you simply can't keep them down. I innovated by having periods when lots of activities would be going on in the room at the same time—one child would be reading, one filing alphabet cards, one looking through books in a corner, one playing teacher with the others, some doing art work, and so forth. It has worked beautifully and it makes it easier for the kids. But some people might look with horror on what seems like a disorganized classroom. I find that

it is easier for the students to concentrate afterwards."

When Sargent Shriver, the first Director of the Peace Corps and now head of the Government's anti-poverty program, visited Cleveland last spring, he said, "I am sure that the same dedication which characterized their Peace Corps service will enable these young people to make an outstanding contribution to the Cleveland public schools."

This dedication in itself, however, can cause problems. The new teachers often expect more of themselves than they can produce. Looking longingly at high school teachers teaching specialized subjects, elementary teachers often feel their class preparation is spread too thinly without sufficient depth in too many subject fields. They see that they cannot give to each child the amount of special attention they want to give. Overseas, the person-to-person approach is the strength of the Peace Corps, but here it is sometimes turned against an eager teacher. One returned Volunteer, teaching in Philadelphia, observed, "I find that my kids want to take advantage of me. In class they act up and try to capitalize on my affection if I have tutored them after hours. One boy, for instance, can neither read nor write in class, but after class I find that he can do his numbers and alphabet and is surprisingly good. How can I get him to do this in class? The ones who act up the most in class and are the most difficult are the ones who need me the most."

A returned Volunteer, teaching in Washington, D.C., says, "The school holds an ambiguous place in the children's life. Even though it is the symbol of authority and the establishment, it also provides warmth in the winter, a chance for recognition (both positive and negative), a possession which they can call their own (*my* teacher, *my* classroom, *my* desk, *my* eraser), a place where things are more ordered than at home, and a place to get away to from home. Many things that I learned while I was attending elementary school were not taught to me at the school but were taught to me by my parents or my playmates. But my children come from homes which are very crowded and where the mother and father both work, or a grandmother rules. It follows then that my children will have an obvious deficit which cannot be made up by the school functioning as it usually does. A kibbutz-type community where child care is the community's responsibility would probably suit the needs of my students better. We need at least a full-scale effort to alleviate those conditions that are blocking their development. This would encompass not education directly but those things which affect education; that is, social rejection, economic isolation, and political impotence. This effort should center around the school, but the schools now are not equipped to provide remedies for those conditions which stand directly in the way of a completed education. In order to do this, the school will have to change its traditional form. It will probably have to change its plant or get out of it and permeate the complete environment."

It is clear that the perception that returned Peace Corps Volunteers bring to their teaching jobs can be a positive influence in designing the tactics needed to cope with the disadvantaged. And if the former Volunteers can see their way through the first difficult months of adjustment, they promise to make an invaluable contribution to this incalculably important problem. An intern in Washington's Cardozo program has spoken revealingly on this subject:

"We have come back from overseas to lose ourselves in a problem so vast that we almost cannot see the forest for the trees. For example, we complain about minor occurrences and dissatisfactions and about bigger difficulties and obstacles, but then we get a curious encouragement from mouthing these complaints to our fellow workers, supervisors, and friends. We become frustrated with our crawling progress, seemingly unachievable goals, poor teaching conditions, but then the frustration sometimes leads to solutions to our problems. We work hard, partly because of our own shortcomings, the stepped-up American pace, and the strenuous workload, but then it seems incredible that we get the job done. We make many mistakes in teaching, in observing our fellow interns, in criticizing the wrong things, but then we are getting better. We have all felt discontented to the point where we wanted to quit, but that same Peace Corps feeling of obligation, of knowledge that the task is really not impossible, of the realization that this is a difficult job that must be completed if our country is to become what we want it to be, of pride that we are undoing an injustice or doing something that should have been done long ago—all this helps us to keep going."